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Utopia and crisis of the post-socialist city: historical transformations of the 19th and 20th century Moscow

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E.A. Bobkova
Department of Architecture and Civil Engineering, Chalmers University of Technology, SE-412 96 Gothenburg, Sweden
e-mail: evgeniya.bobkova@chalmers.se

UTOPIA AND CRISIS OF THE POST-SOCIALIST CITY: HISTORICAL TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE 19th AND 20th CENTURY MOSCOW

Abstract: *The urban history of Moscow, as well as the history of its masterplans, has been thoroughly described in many studies, not least in relation to the political processes of the 20th century that had an immense influence on the formation of cities in the post-socialist block. In this paper, the logic behind the historical evolution of Moscow in the 19th and 20th century will be discussed; the aim here is to introduce another perspective of looking at Moscow's urban transformations. It is proposed, that the evolution of the city is the constant alternative process between the state of utopia and the state of crises. The state of utopia is usually featured by new visions intending to solve the existing urban problems of that time. The state of crisis that often follows, is marked by the externality effects of realized visions and usually results in urban problems on a different level of scale: again, marking the necessity of new visions. Technological developments are integral to these processes; they are used as instruments to solve urban problems, but at the same time, they cause unexpected outcomes that have to be dealt with. To demonstrate this concept, three key periods of Moscow urban evolution in the 19th and 20th century will be studied, including the General Plan of 1935.*
Keywords: *Moscow, urban evolution, technological space, scalar transformations*

> *"If modernism ever managed to throw off its scarps and tatters and the uneasy joints that bind it to the past, it would lose all its weight and depth, and the maelstrom of modern life would carry it helplessly away. It is only by keeping alive the bonds that tie it to the modernists of the past – bonds at once intimate and antagonistic – that it can help the moderns of the present and the future to be free"*
>
> *Berman, 1982, p. 346*

Introduction: the hidden logic behind planning failures of the past

The urban history of Moscow and its masterplans have been widely discussed in many urban studies (Taylor & Kukina, 2017; French, 1995), not least in relation to the history of political processes which had an immense influence on the formation of cities in the post-socialist block.

In this paper, the logic behind the historical evolution of Moscow in the 19th and 20th century will be discussed. The aim is to introduce another perspective of looking at Moscow's urban transformations. The planning decisions of the past are often criticized and regarded as solely shaped by political and ideological considerations. While fully recognizing the importance of the political dimension, in this paper other reasons behind these decisions will be explored and analyzed from the perspective of the spatio-technological processes that shaped it.

During the 20th century Moscow was subjected to many large-scale transformations that had their roots in the complex dynamics of political and technological space. Moscow was the center of a socialist totalitarian state for seventy years, and political will was to a large extent directed at accumulating all the power in the capital city at the expense of the rest of the country (Heller & Nekrich, 1986). However, the technological-spatial processes that shaped the city are discussed less frequently.

Several interesting questions arise that are crucial to understanding the logic of the urban transformations of the past. First, while the history of the post-socialist city is well-known, it remains unclear what exactly makes it so distinctive. And secondly, the question, mostly methodological, is, how do we unveil the constructive logic behind the urban evolution of cities without being biased by our own criticism? The problem is that while we are quite aware of planning failures in the past (for example, large-scale post-war housing projects or radical attempts to redesign the city as the manifestation of political power), we often are so concerned with our criticism that we fail to see the reasons behind those planning decisions and, as a result, repeatedly fail to plan our contemporary cities.

The main focus of this paper is to introduce the method of historical analysis of Moscow urban evolution; drawing from the concepts of Harvey (2003) and Read (2009), it is proposed that the evolution of a city is a constant alterative process of a state of utopia and a state of crisis. The states of utopia are formed by new visions aimed at solving urban problems of that time, and the states of crises that follow usually deal with the externality effects of those visions, usually resulting in new urban problems which in turn call for new visions. Technological developments in infrastructures and modes of production are integral to these processes and are often used as instruments to solve urban problems, however, they are often contradictory and cause unexpected outcomes that have to be addressed in the next step of urban development.

In the next part of the paper, an overview of methodological approaches and related concepts will be presented. In the section that follows, several periods in Moscow's urban evolution in the 19th and 20th century will be discussed in order to demonstrate the method, namely, the policentric supervillage, the 19th century industrial city and the first socialist capital. In the discussion, the potentials of the method will be summarised as well as its relevancy for urban study of our contemporary cities.

Theoretical underpinnings and methodology

The idea of modernity in the context of radical transformations of the past

he urban history of the 20th century Moscow is the history of radical transformations of the city, often described as aiming at introducing a completely new spatial, social or political order in relation to what already existed in the city of that time. In an earlier study (Bobkova, 2014), it was discussed in relation to Harvey's idea of modernity (Harvey, 2003). David Harvey (2003) argued that the idea of modernity as a radical break with the past was a myth, and he proposed instead, following Saint-Simon and Marx, that "no social order can achieve changes that are not already latent within existing conditions" (Harvey, 2003, p.1). This idea sheds a different light on the common belief of modernists of the last century that "modern technology and social order could create a world without ashes" (Berman, 1982). It is important to make a distinction here between the narrower idea of modernism as a particular historical period and the wider idea of modernity that can be referred to any step of urban evolution. Put differently, Harvey states that it is necessary to study modernities of the past not only as acts of 'creative destruction', but hopes, dreams and fears that were always motivating people for action (Harvey, 2003). This concept is used as a starting point for understanding the rationalities of planning failures of the past and will serve as a backbone for a methodology of historical analysis.

Utopia and crisis of contemporary cities: evolution of technology

Based on the concepts described above, it is proposed to study urban evolution through the lens of alternating states of utopia and crises. The state of utopia is often featured by a new vision of the city, aiming at solving the problems of that particular period, be it overpopulation, road congestion or social segregation. The instruments that are used to implement new visions are usually related to technological developments of that time, based on the belief that only technological improvements are capable of dealing with any kind of urban problems. The

difficulty that arises is that planners are usually unable to predict all the side effects that new technologies could cause, thus facing unexpected outcomes of realised visions, which are described here as states of crises.

The idea of "technology" is critical here and is described by Hard and Misa as "the human-made materialities designed with the needs of the urban population and urban commerce in mind" (Hard & Misa, 2008, p. 6)[1]. Newly introduced modes of transportation (whether it be tram networks, underground lines or highways) had always the goal of not only improved accessibility, but of re-formation of the city (Read, 2009). They were a response to the crisis of previous modernity. And, as also noted by David Harvey (2003), the result of the improvement in infrastructure was often not the solution to the problem of congestion, but the recreation of it, on another scale and with different speed (Harvey, 2003). Therefore, despite the fact that technology is frequently understood as a modernising and integrating force (Hard & Misa, 2008), its effects on other levels are often ambiguous, and resulting in a new state of urban crisis. Put differently, the newly introduced technologies could work at integrating the city at one level, but could also result into fragmentation on another, often more local scale. This idea draws back to 'The Production of Space' by Lefebvre, where he pointed out that even most technologically developed system 'cannot produce a space with a perfectly clear understanding of cause and effect, motive and implication' (Stanek, 2011).

Scalar transformations

Transformations in scale are integral to the technological evolution of cities. Changes in technology are usually marked by expansion of spaces where people and commodities can move (Harvey, 2003). They allow for movement at greater distances and speed, meaning a radical jump to another scale. Changes of modes of transportation also involve changing patterns of production and inhabitancy (Smith, 1984). Jumps in scale can result in a series of problems such as an uneven distribution of jobs and housing, or urban sprawl. Over-extension of urban limits (towards a more global scale) results in fragmentation on a local level and an imbalance between patterns of production and inhabitancy; when urban limits are too constrained geographically (too localised and globally disconnected), the urban labour force also becomes comparatively limited, and there is a threat of stagnation of productive forces (Smith, 1984). In other words, networks of relations between production and inhabitancy only operate effectively if they are meaningful across several scale levels (Read, 2009).

These concepts are critical when we aim to understand the rationalities behind the urban plans of the past in a more constructive way, and so, in the next section, several periods of Moscow urban transformations will be studied from this perspective. As discussed above, the evolution of infrastructures (also referred to as 'mobility') is central to technological development, but related to this is the evolution of patterns of production and inhabitancy. Therefore, the changing conditions over time of these three layers of urban space (mobility, production and inhabitancy) will be presented further.

The evolution of Moscow as the evolution of politico-technological space

Logic of integration vs. logic of fragmentation

Radical planning actions of the past are often critised and described as the cause of fragmentation in our contemporary cities. In the case of Moscow, this critique often addresses the consequences of the Masterplan of 1935, when Moscow was redesigned as a manifestation of political power, the General plan of 1957 that triggered large-scale construction of postwar dormitory districts, or the post-socialist neo-liberal development of the city. Planning failures of the past always served particular rationalities to achieve particular goals, and never meant to

[1] Here and further: text of the paper is based on earlier master thesis research project "Productive landscapes of Moscow: binding modernities" (Bobkova, 2014).

cause spatial fragmentation of the city, social segregation or the like. They followed the logic of integration between particular functions and particular kinds of infrastructures. The fragmentation of the urban fabric, in turn, was caused by the side effects of these actions, but not by the planning actions themselves (Read, 2009).

A more detailed demonstration of this logic is presented below with a description of the continuous set of Moscow transformations through history. The analysis is built mainly on the interpretation of historical maps, redrawn and deconstructed by the author of this paper.

Polycentric supervillage

By the beginning of the nineteenth century Moscow was functioning mainly as a trading city and was growing in a self-organised way. Local neighbourhoods of artisans and tradesmen grew naturally along the main radial roads, and main roads used to connect the city with other cities and neighbouring countries (Sitin, 1958). Global networks of trade were naturally integrated into local neighbourhoods of craftsmen which were, in turn, connected by the irregular local networks of public spaces (Figure 1). The 'medieval' organisation of Moscow can be described as 'polycentric supervillage' where local and global infrastructures were organically integrated across several scale levels, representing a state of 'utopia'.

Nevertheless, with the need for industrial upgrade as well as the problem of overpopulation, by the end of the nineteenth century the city faced the need for radical improvements.

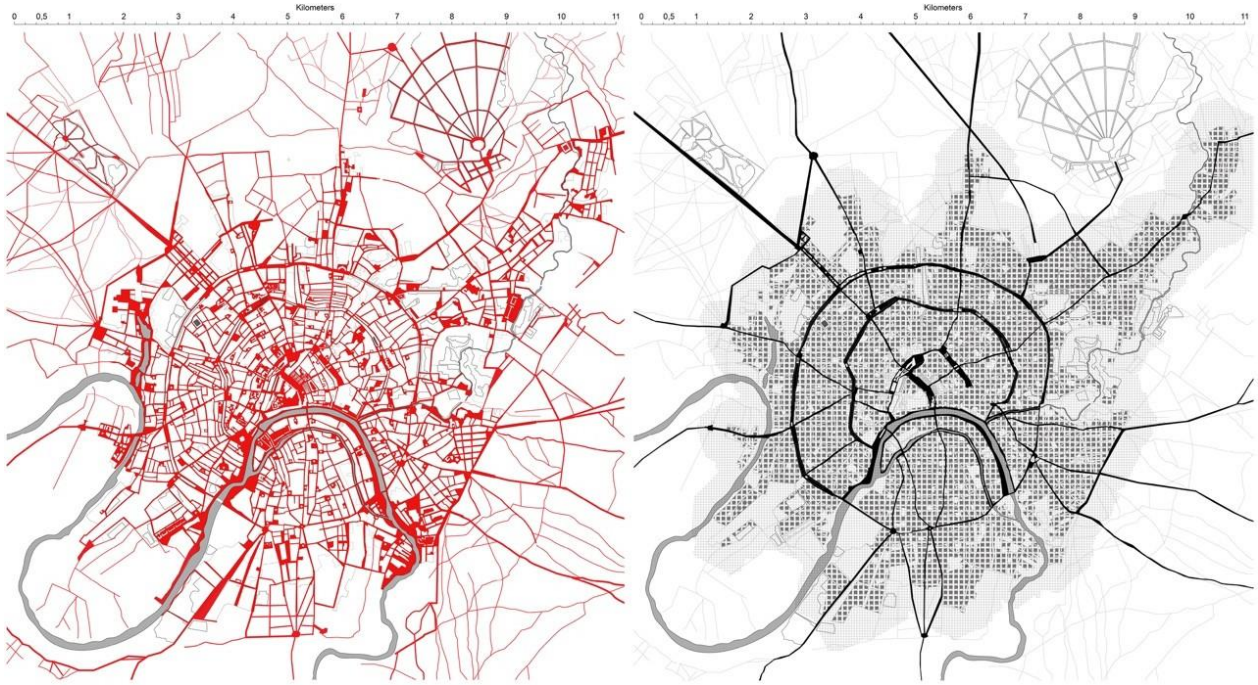

Figure 1. Moscow as a polycentric supervillage. Irregular local network of public spaces (on the left) and global trading routes with local quarters of artisans distributed across the city (on the right). Source: Moscow map 1880, 1852 http://www.etomesto.ru

Moscow as a 19th century industrial city[1]

The next state of 'utopia' was marked by the response to a rapid industrial modernization of the country at the end of the 19th century. Nine railway stations were constructed around the inner city, later connected to a ring railroad to shape the largest transport and logistic hub in the country. Newly constructed dense networks of tramlines were integrated into the network

[1] Though transformation of this period is partly related to the early 20th century, we call it "a 19th century industrial city" because it was following the pattern of transformations in European cities several decades earlier/

of railways and formed a new mobility system at higher speed, that connected local pedestrian infrastructures with global movement networks or railways.

Railway stations were a crucial part of this project of modernisation: they represented a new type of centralities, providing a smooth shift from one scale to another. According to Lefebvre, the centralities or monuments are both multitemporal and interscalar, in a sense that they work both as political manifestations of space through time, but also establish the link between various scales and mediate between them (Stanek, 2011). Hence, they could also be described as the 'lure' of urban transformation of that time: they became the new symbols of the globalised city. Interestingly, in the 'medieval' supervillage churches represented major centralities in the city and also shaped public spaces around it, while later in the 20th century, the role of this kind of global centralities was partly inherited by shopping malls connected to highways. Hence the idea of continuous 'upscale' can be also observed in the evolution of urban centralities themselves and is often coupled to a gradual 'interiorisation' of these types of spaces.

In the 19th century industrial city, new mobility systems served not only to connect different hubs, but, as a public space of higher speed, offered 'explorability' of the city through movement. Modernization of infrastructure was also a response to the new scale of production emerging in the city (factories). Heavy industries were located in the eastern part of the city (due to the wind direction) and downstream from the Moscow River, while textile manufacturing was located close to the river and mainly upstream (Figure 2).

Figure 2. The 19th century industrial city. New tram networks integrated in the railway system (on the left) and the new ring of factories (on the right, dark grey).
Source: Moscow map 1915, 1913 http://www.etomesto.ru

The state of 'crisis' that followed was characteristic for the most industrial cities of that time. Industrialisation was followed by overpopulation, while built fabric still had the archaic character of 'supervillage'. Most buildings were low-rise and made from wood, and engineering systems of water and sewerage were extremely limited (Kharin, 2007). The urban conditions as well as the economic devastation after the political events of 1917 called for a radical modernization of the city.

Moscow as the first socialist capital (General plan of 1935)

After the 1917 Revolution and the following Civil War (1917-1923), when industrial production fell into decline, a radical transformation of the city took place. This period is

commonly described as a project to redesign the city as the manifestation of the totalitarian power, but usually less attention is paid to the equally important fact that during this time Moscow was reconstructed as the biggest hub of heavy industries in the USSR, following the goal of radical industrial upgrade at the expense of other types of production and the housing sector (Becker, et al., 2012), – spatial transformation that had a huge influence on the later urban developments of the city throughout the 20th century.

The transformations involved expansion of the industrial belt, the creation of new housing blocks along wide thoroughfares, and the introduction of the underground network. New infrastructure connected the city centre, where most people lived, to the new belt of heavy industries. In the context of a complete lack of private space (approx. 4-5m^2 per person between the 1920s and 1950s, Heller & Nekrich, 1986), most attention was given to the development of new road and public transport infrastructures that connected the city centre where most people lived in communal apartments with the surrounding belt of heavy industries. It is important to describe the transformations of this period not only as the new monumental ensembles that fragmented urban fabric locally, but also as the *utopian project of integration* between the space of inhabitancy in the centre and space of production in the new belt of industries (see Figure 3).

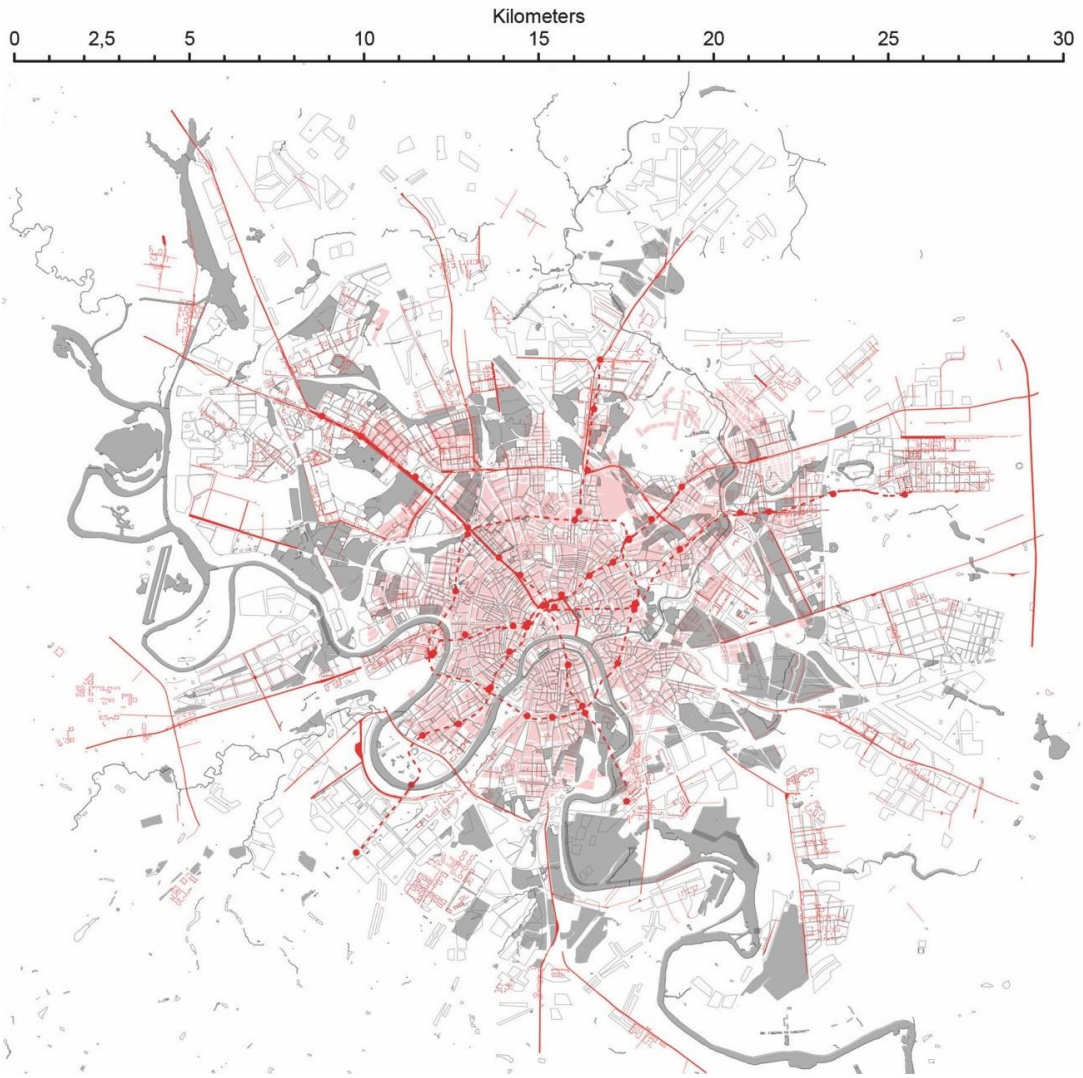

Figure 3. First socialist capital as the project of integration. Underground network (red dashed line) connecting existing residential fabric (in light red) and new belt of heavy industries (in grey. Source: Archaeology of the Periphery (2013) pp.256-257, 284-285; Metromap 1957 http://www.metro.ru/map/1957/

The extreme focus on industrial upscale and monumental projects, coupled with housing shortage and an even larger inflow of people from the villages caused by the collectivisation, put the city in a new stage of deep crisis and required a radical set of actions from the next generation of planners.

The urban projects that followed (massive postwar housing construction, modernist plans from 1971 and the neo-liberal development of the city after the 1990s) had to deal with the effects and contradictions of previous plans and followed the logic of utopia-crisis cycle described above. Each of the next steps of urban evolution was featured by the constant jumps in scale with the means of introducing faster infrastructures and more globalised centralities and public spaces. The new investments into global-scale infrastructures were based on the same beliefs that ever new technologies of higher speed and scale would be able to solve the problems inherited from the previous periods, and also accommodate the needs of constantly modernising the city, that included, for instance, the need to deal with a massive population inflow and changing modes of production, as well as with the need to provide an effective mobility system for the rapidly growing city.

Discussion

In previous section a general overview of Moscow's urban transformations has been presented. It was not the intention to retell its already well-known story, but to reveal the logic that connected these transformations through time and rationalities of particular planning decisions. Each step of urban evolution is a story in itself, and the discussion of three representative periods presented here did not aim at revealing the whole complexity of each, but worked as a demonstration of the theory.

The particular planning decisions of the past, so often criticised nowadays, were issued as pragmatic responses to the crisis of the previous 'modernity' of the city. They were based on the common belief of the planners that newly introduced technologies would work as the integrating force for the fragmented urban fabric, but their possible side effects would often be overlooked (see Figure 5).

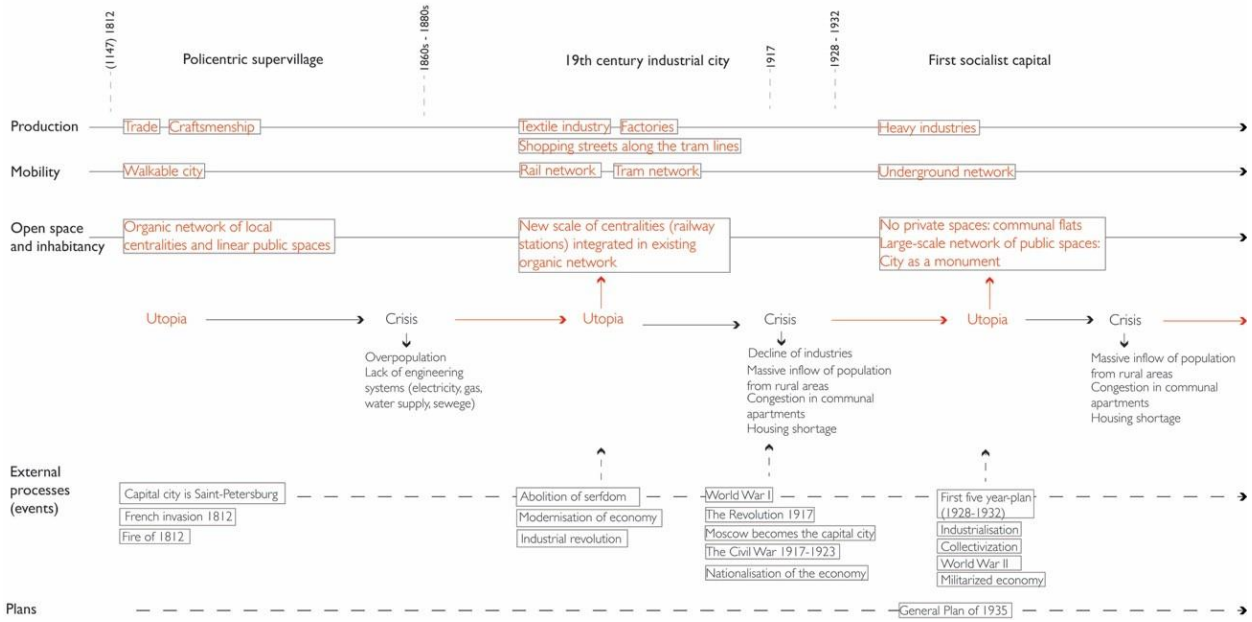

Figure 4. Urban evolution of Moscow as the alternative process of changing states of utopia and crises

Read (2009) points out that the relations between the space of production and the space of inhabitancy are articulated through infrastructures, and the significance of places is formulated by the overlapping infrastructures of different scales and speeds, where the nested hierarchy of scales is the critical condition which makes the places operative through all levels (Read, 2009).

The phenomena of overlapping scales are observed in the medieval structure of Moscow (polycentric supervillage) and in the 19th century industrial city where infrastructures of local or neighbourhood scale were organically integrated into more global networks of intercity trade networks or logistic hubs. What happened later was marked by the loss of this interscalar relationship between global and local networks. It was partly due to the 'one-sided' approach of the planners who had to respond to the particular urgencies of that time at the expense of the rest; and partly due to the speed of technological advances that triggered high-speed urban expansions on global scale at the expense of the local.

Another additional point can be made here regarding the question what is it that is so distinctive about post-socialist cities that makes them so different from, for example, cities in western Europe. The political dimension is indeed extremely important, but, as demonstrated earlier, the evolution of Moscow was also to a large extent conditioned by pragmatic and technological processes. As French (1995) pointed out, all cities must carry the same functions regardless of the planning system, and here the evolution of Moscow followed almost the same route as western capitalist cities, but with a substantial time lag between them (French, 1995). Indeed, we cannot state that *the processes* that shaped the post-socialist cities were so distinctive, but *the scale* and *the pace* of these processes is what made them different.

It is proposed that the presented method is mostly relevant for understanding the logic of urban transformation of the past and also establishing the methods for constructing our future cities. Most importantly, reformulating Lefebvre (Stanek, 2011), it demonstrates how urban space is both a product of social practices and their facilitator, it is both 'produced and productive'. Our approach to understanding contemporary cities is only instrumental when they are perceived not as a collection of fragments, but as a complex interrelation of several spatio-temporal layers and across several scale levels. Reformulating Read (2009), our contemporary city is not a medieval village with pedestrian streets and small businesses, it is not the city of trams with shopping streets, neither is it a city of highways and malls nor a 24/7 metropolitan city, but it is everything at the same time, and it only becomes operative if urban planners are able to comprehend its complex space-time choreography without being 'lured' by another utopian visions or technologies.

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